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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: PREL PTER MOPS LE IS

SUBJECT: UNIFIL SAYS ISRAEL CROSSED BLUE LINE, BUT
UNINTENTIONALLY, AND THAT THE LAF FIRED FIRST

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (U) This is an action request -- please see para 12.

SUMMARY

¶12. (C) UNIFIL Force Commander Claudio Graziano, in a hastily arranged 2/13 briefing for P-5 and UNIFIL-contributing country COMs, criticized both the Lebanese and Israelis regarding the 2/5 and 2/7 Blue Line incidents: both parties had violated the Blue Line, and both had violated UNSCR 1701. Regarding the IED explosions on 2/5, the IDF had fired across the Blue Line to detonate charges inside Lebanon. While the IEDs were no doubt of a hostile nature, the IDF had not acted in self defense and its action had made it impossible to determine when the charges had been laid. The 2/7 incident was more serious. The IDF denied UNIFIL requests to await daybreak and coordination before starting to clear a suspected minefield, and the LAF opened fire across the Blue Line in what UNIFIL considered a hostile act. After the LAF fire, the IDF crossed the Blue Line to a depth of about 25 meters. Using maps and photographs to make his points, Graziano assessed that the IDF incursion across the Blue Line was inadvertent but nevertheless avoidable, had the IDF acted less recklessly. Graziano complained that IDF commanders were unavailable to him during sensitive parts of the 2/7 incident. On a brighter note, Graziano described a subsequent 2/12 tripartite coordination meeting as positive and referred to progress in a UNIFIL-led process to replace missing Blue Line markers to provide more visible references. End summary.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador, along with other P-5 COMs and representatives of countries offering UNIFIL troops, attended a 2/13 briefing led by new UNIFIL Commander Graziano, who was joined by UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen and UNIFIL Senior Political Advisor Milos Strugar. As an opening, Graziano said that the two incidents -- IED explosions on 2/5 and LAF/IDF exchanges during an IDF mine-clearing attempt on 2/7 -- had underscored the need for better tripartite cooperation. In the aftermath of the 2/7 incident, both sides gave a commitment for better coordination, and he described a 2/12 tripartite meeting as positive.

IEDS ON 2/7 -- HOSTILE INTENTION,
BUT IDF SHOULD HAVE AWAITED UNIFIL

¶4. (C) Regarding the 2/5 incident, Graziano said that the IDF had informed UNIFIL that it spotted a suspicious object in a minefield. Before UNIFIL could get there to investigate as the Israelis had requested, the Israelis had taken action by firing into the object, which exploded and set off several other blasts. The chain of several IEDs seemed to be similar in nature to what was used in the 7/12 Hezbollah attack against Israel, Graziano said. Without doubt, they had been planted with hostile intent. But their placement 6-8 meters north of the Blue Line made the Israeli fire across the Blue Line a violation, since there was no immediate danger to Israeli forces. This was not self-defensive fire. Graziano said that it would have been better for the Israelis to await UNIFIL action. Also, UNIFIL regretted that the Israeli fire and subsequent explosions made it difficult to determine when the IEDs had been placed. Based on what could be studied, it did not appear as though the IEDs ("fairly crude devices") had yet been wired with detonators. Asking the Ambassador's question about the logic of the placement of the IEDs on the Lebanese side of the Blue Line, Graziano acknowledged that, yes, the range was sufficient -- in the 50-meter range -- that, had they been detonated, they could easily have hit Israeli targets passing south of the Blue Line.

ON 2/7, LAF FIRES FIRST ACROSS BLUE LINE;
IDF BULLDOZER CROSSES BLUE LINE "INADVERTENTLY"

¶5. (C) Graziano described the 2/7 incident as more serious. He went through a detailed chronology (that we will only summarize here). UNIFIL was first informed of IDF assembly of equipment south of the technical fence across from Maroun al-Ras by the LAF, as night fell. When UNIFIL asked the IDF, the IDF answered that they would be clearing a suspected

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minefield north of the technical fence but on the Israeli side of the Blue Line. The IDF then asked UNIFIL to inform the LAF. The LAF, through UNIFIL, requested an Israeli postponement ("they were begging the Israelis not to cross the technical fence") until the following day, when tripartite communication could take place. Noting its right to act unilaterally on its territory, the Israelis said that they would proceed as planned; the LAF told UNIFIL that the Lebanese would fire if the Israelis breached the technical fence. When the Israelis opened a section of the fence, the Lebanese opened fire, first as warning shots and then directly at the IDF, a hostile act and in violation of UNSCR ¶1701. The Israelis returned fire, pulled back some equipment, and used the bulldozer to clear land that stretched 25 meters north of the Blue Line, another violation of UNSCR 1701. (Graziano used diagrams, maps, and photographs to make his points, illustrating clearly the 1949 Armistice line, the technical fence, and the Blue Line on his maps and photos.)

2/7 INCIDENT 'AVOIDABLE'

¶6. (C) Graziano said that the incident was "regrettable and avoidable." The IDF incursion north of the Blue Line was surely inadvertent and not intended as a hostile act. But he could identify no reasonable military rationale for proceeding in clearing a suspected minefield at night, when the Blue Line is even harder to identify than during daytime and when the risks of problems that much higher. What was particularly frustrating, Graziano said, was the trouble he had communicating with the IDF once the incident started. While at first he was talking to BG Udi Dekel, then became unavailable. Graziano tried to reach a major general (not identified further), who refused to take the call. So Graziano found himself trying to pass messages through lower-level IDF officers who were unable to take decisions quickly, which is what he needed. Asked by the UK Ambassador why he thought the Israelis had insisted upon the nighttime mine-clearing operation, Graziano shook his head and

responded that he can only conclude it was a political decision. The Ambassador asked whether the Israelis acknowledged that they had crossed the Blue Line. Answering a bit opaquely, Graziano said that "both sides accepted my analysis."

LIKE ISRAELI DECISION TO PROCEED,
LAF ACTED "POLITICALLY" IN FIRING

¶7. (C) While the LAF was available to him at all levels and continually, the LAF also had acted too quickly in firing at the Israelis, thus provoking Israeli fire and risking escalation that could have quickly spread beyond control. The Ambassador asked why the LAF had opened fire upon the breach of the technical fence. After all, even if the Blue Line was obscure at that point, the LAF would know that the technical fence is south of the Blue Line. Graziano speculated that the Lebanese motivation was similar to that of the Israelis: political, although he was quick to add that the LAF's "political" decision was more serious, in having potentially lethal consequences.

¶8. (C) Yet while he disagreed sharply with how it was achieved, Graziano thought it "wasn't bad" that the LAF had new credibility in the south. He speculated that Hizballah would have used an Israeli incursion across the Blue Line to humiliate both UNIFIL and the LAF. The LAF's "reckless" fire had, ironically, taken a propaganda tool from Hizballah's hands, albeit at considerable risk and in clear violation of UNSCR 1701. Graziano confirmed that he told the LAF Commander and PM Siniora at the time of the LAF fire -- i.e., before the Israeli bulldozer crossed the Blue Line -- that Lebanon had violated UNSCR 1701 and must cease firing, which the LAF did.

MARKING THE BLUE LINE

¶9. (C) As a result of these two incidents, Graziano said that the 2/12 tripartite coordination meeting had been very constructive. Both sides vowed to strive for better coordination through UNIFIL. They reaffirmed their desire to see the Blue Line more visibly marked, a process that began

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(initially over LAF reluctance) in December with UNIFIL replacing damaged or missing markers and supplementing the 144 that existed before the July-August 2006 war with additional blue plates. Graziano noted that the Lebanese did not accept a tripartite committee to place the markers together. So the Israelis agreed to participate electronically rather than physically -- a Lebanese-UNIFIL team places the markers after using GPS to coordinate the location with the Israelis. In the next regularly scheduled tripartite meeting on 2/26, Graziano wants to work for a solution to Ghajjar village in accordance with an informal understanding hammered out but not implemented at the end of ¶2006.

¶10. (C) In some places, the placement of markers is impossible, Graziano said. For example, in the area of the village of Adeisseh, there are 18 Lebanese houses and a locally used road that are south of the Blue Line. While these are north of the 1949 Armistice line and presumably would fall to Lebanon in any final border demarcation, "a certain sloppiness" on the part of the UN in 2000 put the Blue Line in the wrong spot. If UNIFIL were to demarcate the Blue Line now and make it clear that these 18 houses were on the "wrong" side, the Lebanese would no doubt claim that UNIFIL is assisting Israel in a land grab. There are several spots like this along the Blue Line, Graziano said, some of which benefit Israel and some Lebanon. In those areas, UNIFIL will practice discretion and not place markers.

¶11. (C) Graziano noted that the LAF also hopes to construct

a patrol road along the Lebanese side of the Blue Line, similar to the patrol road that the Israelis have alongside the technical fence. Graziano thought this was a good idea, as it would provide more of a physical reminder to shepherds and farmers as to where the physical Blue Line is located (as many Lebanese assume Israel's technical fence, which is south of the Blue Line by varying distances, is the Blue Line). "I hope, Graziano says, "that Hizballah doesn't veto" the LAF hope to build a patrol road.

ACTION REQUEST

¶12. (C) UNIFIL and Geir Pedersen have briefed PM Siniora of these findings. The Ambassador sees Siniora on 2/15. Unless instructed otherwise, the Ambassador plans to raise this issue with Siniora, to note our concern with both sides' behavior on 2/7. If Washington agrees, the Ambassador would acknowledge to Siniora UNIFIL's determination that the Israeli bulldozer crossed the Blue Line, and he will note that USG officials will raise with the Israelis the need to act in full coordination in sensitive border areas to avoid problems. But the Ambassador will also note that the IDF violation of the Blue Line, while unfortunate, seems to be inadvertent and without hostile intent. The LAF fire, by contrast, was clearly of a hostile nature and could have provoked a much larger problem. This suggests to us the need for serious, continual tripartite coordination and communication. We would appreciate Washington's concurrence with these points. Please advise.

FELTMAN